

**Recurring Themes of Professional Learning Communities and  
the Assumptions They Challenge**

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## Chapter 1

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# Recurring Themes of Professional Learning Communities and the Assumptions They Challenge

Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour

Victor Hugo once wrote, “There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world, and that is an idea whose time has come” (Hugo, 1883–1884). Those committed to improving K–12 education should be heartened by Hugo’s assertion, for there has never been greater consensus regarding the most powerful strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement. Mike Schmoker (2004) has cited “a broad, even remarkable concurrence” among educational researchers and organizational theorists who have concluded that developing the capacity of educators to function as members of professional learning communities is the “best-known means by which we might achieve truly historic, wide-scale improvements in teaching and learning” (p. 432).

Educational organizations of all varieties have also endorsed the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs). The

National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003), created for the expressed purpose of developing strategies for recruiting, preparing, and supporting an exemplary teaching force, concludes that "quality teaching requires strong professional learning communities" (p. 17). Five "Core Propositions" guide the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, another organization created to advance the quality of teaching and learning. One of those propositions asserts that teachers must be members of "learning communities . . . [who] contribute to the effectiveness of their schools by working collaboratively with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development, and staff development" (2004). The Keys Initiative of the National Education Association (2004) was designed to help educators develop shared commitment to high academic goals, collaborative problem solving, continuous assessment for teaching and learning, and ongoing learning for professionals—critical elements of the PLC concept. The American Federation of Teachers (2004) has endorsed the premise that teachers should be engaged in a "continuous process of individual and collective examination and improvement of practice," and that staff development should be "job-embedded and site-specific"—once again, proposals consistent with the PLC concept.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2002) has defined the very job of elementary and middle school principals as "leading learning communities," and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004) has called upon its members to develop professional learning communities as one of its three key strategies to improve the learning experience of every student. The National Staff Development Council (2004) has adopted standards designed



to improve the effectiveness of all schools, but the first of those standards asserts “staff development that improves learning for all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with the school and district.”

There are many divisive issues in contemporary education. It would seem, however, that the benefits of organizing schools and districts into professional learning communities in which educators work collaboratively with and learn from one another is one idea upon which educators can find common ground. In fact, it would be difficult to identify any leading educational researcher or organization that is explicitly opposed to PLCs. Might it be said that the PLC concept is truly an idea whose time has come?

Unfortunately, an honest answer to that question is, “not so fast.” Advocates of PLCs face at least three daunting challenges in their efforts to make this concept the norm in schools and districts throughout North America:

- Challenge one: Developing and applying shared knowledge
- Challenge two: Sustaining the hard work of change
- Challenge three: Transforming school culture

### **Challenge One: Developing and Applying Shared Knowledge**

First, as Michael Fullan (2005) wisely notes, “There is a growing problem in large-scale reform; namely, the *terms* travel well, but the underlying *conceptualization and thinking* do not” (p. 10). Many schools and districts that proudly proclaim they are professional learning communities have shown little evidence of either understanding the core concepts or implementing the practices of PLCs. Educators must develop a

deeper, shared knowledge of learning community concept and practices, and then must demonstrate the discipline to apply those concepts and practices in their own settings if their schools are to be transformed.

## **Challenge Two: Sustaining the Hard Work of Change**

The second challenge flows from the first. It has been said that even the grandest design eventually degenerates into hard work. The PLC concept may be the most powerful design to improve schools, but it will require more than adopting new mission statements, launching strategic plans, or flying a banner proclaiming “we are a learning community” to develop the capacity of educators to create PLCs. Administrators and teachers, whose plates are already full, will be called upon to do the hard work associated with significant school reform. And it does take hard work. Although educators in schools that are functioning as PLCs typically report that their load has been lightened by the clarity, collaborative culture, and collective responsibility in their schools, they also acknowledge that it did require considerable effort and energy to break from old habits and to begin to act in new ways.

In his landmark study, Jim Collins (2001) found that the success of organizations that were able to make the leap from “good to great” was never the result of a single defining action, groundbreaking program, or miracle moment. As Collins wrote:

Good to great comes by a cumulative process—step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn upon turn of the flywheel—that adds up to sustained and spectacular results. . . . It was a quiet, deliberate process of figuring out what needed to be done to create the best future



results and then taking those steps one way or the other. By pushing in a constant direction over an extended period of time, they inevitably hit a point of breakthrough. (p. 169)

Educators can create professional learning communities, but there are no easy shortcuts for doing so. It will require a staff to find common ground and to exert a focused, coherent, consistent effort over time.

### **Challenge Three: Transforming School Culture**

The third challenge is even more problematic. With no disrespect to Monsieur Hugo, even an idea whose time seems to have come can lose momentum when colliding with the traditional beliefs it challenges, particularly if those beliefs continue to go largely unexamined.

The PLC concept represents more than just a series of practices—it rests upon a set of beliefs, assumptions, and expectations regarding school.

Therefore, significant school transformation will require more than changes in structure—the policies, programs, and procedures of a school. Substantive and lasting change will ultimately require a transformation of culture—the beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for the people throughout the organization. Principals and teachers can be placed in new structures and go through the motions of new practices, but unless they eventually develop new competencies and new commitments that lead to true school reculturing, they will continue to be under the inexorable pull of their traditional practices and the assumptions that drive them. If schools are to be successful in developing

their capacity as PLCs, new assumptions must ultimately prevail over long-standing traditional beliefs.

Let's examine the recurring themes that will emerge from the various authors who have contributed to this book as well as the traditional assumptions with which those themes are likely to collide.

### **Clashing Purposes: Learning for All Versus Teaching for All**

The authors of the chapters in this collection repeatedly ground their proposals for substantive school reform on the premise that the very purpose of schooling is to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their future success. Their emphasis is not on raising test scores, but on schools making a positive difference in the lives of students and thereby fulfilling a fundamentally moral purpose.

Their premise—that schools exist to ensure that all students *learn* at high levels—collides with the traditional assumption that the purpose of school is to ensure that students are *taught*. When the latter assumption prevails, educators believe they have a responsibility to give all students the opportunity to learn, but the extent of the learning will depend on factors outside the school's sphere of influence, such as innate ability, students' socioeconomic levels, their degree of motivation, and so on.

The institutions in which contemporary educators work were built upon the premise that the ability to achieve high levels of learning was reserved for the elite, and that schools served students and society best by sorting and selecting students based upon their ability to learn and their likely occupations. Ever

the most enlightened thinkers who led the initiative to create public schooling accepted this premise. For example, Thomas Jefferson called for Virginia schools to educate all children for 3 years, and then begin a carefully designed process of elimination that would limit the number of students eligible to attend college to no more than 10 males each year (Jefferson, 1782). The early advocates of public high school designed the institution to sort and select students, arguing that all students “cannot do and do not need the same education” (Leavitt, 1912, p. 2). The National Education Association officially endorsed this premise, criticizing the “excessively democratic ideal that all are equal and our society is devoid of classes” (Cubberly, 1909, p. 57) and applauding the recognition of “differences among children as to aptitude, interests, economic resources, and prospective careers” (National Education Association, 1910, p. 96).

The working class did not rally around the high school as an institution designed to promote educational opportunity for their children. In fact, the most powerful labor union of the late 19th Century opposed public high schools as “class education” for which only the beneficiaries should pay (Welter, 1963). In the early 20th Century, university presidents throughout the United States complained that too many students were being admitted to college at a time when only 3.3% of the nation had earned a college degree (Cremin, 1964). Dropping out of high school prior to graduation was the norm in the United States until the 1950s. Clearly, the idea that all students could or should learn at high levels was inconceivable to earlier generations, and they designed their institutions to reflect their basic assumption that intelligence was something you were born with, not something you acquired.



The legacy of this assumption continues to have significant influence upon the policies and practices of contemporary schools, and, more importantly, the lives of the students who attend them. But sorting and selecting students has never come at a higher cost. A recent analysis (Mortenson, 2004) of the impact of higher education upon earning power concluded:

Since about 1973 a college education has become the most direct path to well paid employment and financial security in the United States. Until the early 1970s one could achieve a middle-class lifestyle by being honest and working hard. But over the last 30 years a college education has become a requisite addition. . . . A high school education or less is no longer sufficient and has not been so for three decades.

This finding is particularly sobering in light of the fact that educational attainment continues to be heavily influenced by family income, with those in the top income quartile ten times more likely to earn a college degree than those in the bottom quartile (American Youth Policy Forum, 2001).

Peter Drucker (1992) contends that the first and most significant question the members of any organization must answer if they hope to improve its effectiveness is the question of purpose. What is the task we have been organized to accomplish? If the purpose of schooling is to ensure that all students are taught, and then to assist in the sorting and selecting process based on the initial academic success or the perceived aptitude of students, there is no compelling reason to improve schools. In fact, it could be argued that schools have been tremendously effective in fulfilling their purpose of sorting and selecting students.

If, however, as Doug Reeves writes so persuasively in chapter 3, the fundamental purpose of schooling is to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success as ongoing learners, the need for improvement is immediate and imperative. The PLC concept is grounded in this making-a-difference sense of moral purpose, but if the PLC model is to take root in school, it must supplant the deeply entrenched traditional assumptions that have guided schools for over a century.

In his study of high-performing organizations, Jim Collins (2001) found that those organizations simplified a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle, or a concept that unified and guided the work of everyone within the organization. In a PLC, that unifying principle asserts that we have not fulfilled our fundamental purpose until *all* students have learned at high levels. Once that principle is truly embraced, the need for significant change becomes evident. Educators begin to work together to clarify such questions as:

- What is it we want all students to learn?
- How will we know when each student has mastered the essential learning?
- How will we respond when a student experiences initial difficulty in learning?
- How will we deepen the learning for students who have already mastered essential knowledge and skills?

When educators embrace learning for all as the fundamental purpose of their school, they begin to recognize that some students will require additional time and support in order to be successful, and they develop processes for providing that

time and support during the school day on a timely, directive, and systematic basis. They shift their focus from summative assessments to formative assessments. They compare each student's performance to an agreed-upon standard rather than comparing students to each other. They concentrate on each student's mastery of each essential knowledge and skill rather than relying on averages. They recognize the need to work together collaboratively rather than in isolation. In short, as Andy Hargreaves (2004) observes, "A professional learning community is an ethos that infuses every single aspect of a school's operation. When a school becomes a professional learning community, everything in the school looks different than it did before" (p. 5).

But in order for this transformation to occur, the idea that schools were created to ensure all students must learn at high levels must ultimately prevail. As Edward Fiske (1992), the long-time educational correspondent of the *New York Times*, wrote, "to truly reform American Education we must abandon the long-standing assumption that the central activity is teaching and reorient all policy making and activities around a new benchmark: student learning" (p. 253).

### **Collaborative Cultures Versus Teacher Isolation**

A second major idea embedded in the PLC concept and a theme that emerges repeatedly throughout this book is that educators cannot help all students learn at high levels unless they work together collaboratively. The research in support of the benefits of collaboration is exhaustive, as is the research that links collaborative cultures to improving schools. Yet, despite the abundance of evidence regarding the benefits of collaborative cultures and the virtual absence of evidence to

the contrary, it is the norm for public school teachers in North America to work in isolation with individual teachers, like independent subcontractors, teaching discrete groups of students. An honest assessment of the brutal facts in most schools would support Tracy Kidder's (1989) observation: "Decades of research and reform have not altered the fundamental facts of teaching. The task of universal, public education is still being conducted by a woman alone in a little room, presiding over a youthful distillate of a town or city" (p. 53).

Seymour Sarason (1996) laments that almost 40 years ago he described teaching as "a lonely profession," and little has changed. A landmark sociological study of teaching conducted over a quarter of a century ago described its "cellular structure" in which each teacher assumes responsibility for his or her own room and own students (Lortie, 1975), a description that still rings true today.

Why has the isolation prevailed despite the evidence that it serves the interests of neither students nor teachers? Is it, as Bruce Joyce (2004) suggests, because the profession attracts people who are specifically seeking workplaces of high isolation? Or is it, as Sarason contends, that the structure and culture of schools create such physical and psychological isolation of teachers that it is almost impossible for them to engage in productive learning with their colleagues? Is it the influence of higher education where academic freedom has been revered and individual autonomy has been regarded as a professional perquisite? Is it the influence of the media whose sympathetic portrayal of a teacher inevitably depicts the courageous individual working alone against the system and the bureaucratic administrators who perpetuate it (think *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, *To*

*Sir With Love, Dangerous Minds, Stand and Deliver*)? Or is simply because it is far easier to work alone than to learn together? Regardless of the reason for the undeniable endurance of teacher isolation, the PLC concept will never become the norm in schools unless educators take steps to (1) systematically embed collaboration in the routine practices of the school and, just as importantly, (2) provide the structure and parameters to ensure that the collaboration focuses on improving the learning of both students and adults. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of a collaborative culture, the tradition of teacher isolation continues to pose a formidable barrier to those hoping to implement PLC concepts in their schools.

### **Collective Capacity Versus Individual Development**

The PLC concept is specifically designed to develop the collective capacity of a staff to work together to achieve the fundamental purpose of the school: high levels of learning for students. Leaders of the process purposefully set out to create the conditions that enable teachers to learn from one another as part of their routine work practices. Continuous learning becomes school based and job embedded. In chapter 1 Barbara Eason-Watkins describes this focus on building the collective capacity of a staff as the linchpin strategy for promoting PLCs throughout the entire Chicago public school system.

This new vision of professional development—building the collective capacity of a staff to achieve its goals through job embedded learning—flies in the face of traditional staff development. Two of the byproducts of the isolation of teachers have been that the individual classroom teacher has typically been the focus of school improvement efforts and that t

source of professional development has been seen as external—something that occurs away from the school or when someone from outside the school drops in to share some wisdom. Individual teachers traditionally have been provided with incentives to pursue their personal professional development away from the school—tuition support for graduate courses, movement on the salary schedule for advanced degrees, funding for workshops and conferences, and so on. The underlying assumption behind this approach is that if the third grade teacher becomes a better teacher in his or her “cellular structure” (that is, private kingdom), the school will become more effective in achieving its goals.

This premise—the development of individuals ensures enhanced organizational performance—is patently wrong. In their landmark study of successful schools, Newmann and his associates (1996) found that leaders of those schools realized that increasing the knowledge and skills of individual teachers was not sufficient to foster sustained school improvement. They focused instead on “increasing the capacity of the organization by placing issues of teaching and learning at the center of the dialogue among the entire school community” (p. 291). And building collective capacity requires more than sending teachers off to pursue different courses or providing them with workshops. As Michael Fullan (2005) wrote, “capacity building . . . is the daily habit of *working together*, and you can’t learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn it by doing it and getting better at it on purpose” (p. 69).

The best professional development occurs in the context of the workplace rather than the workshop as teachers work together to address the issues and challenges that are relevant

to them. It is pursued in a social setting with opportunities for interaction rather than in isolation. It is directly and purposefully designed to help educators accomplish the collective goals of their team and school rather than having individuals pursue their personal interests and agendas. Until the conceptual model that guides the professional development of a staff becomes teams of teachers working together in the context of their school to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their team and school goals, that school will have difficulty becoming a PLC.

### **A Focus on Results Versus a Focus on Activities**

Of course, once the focus of professional development shifts from the individual staff member to improving the school's collective capacity to fulfill its purpose and achieve its goals, the school begins to develop a results orientation. Educators begin to ask, "What evidence do we have that this initiative or this practice is helping us to become more effective in assisting all students to achieve at high levels?" As Peter Senge and his associates (1994) observe, "ultimately, a learning organization is judged by results" (p. 44).

Traditionally, however, schools have demonstrated "almost a cultural and ingrained aversion to reckoning with much less living with results" (Schmoker, 1996, p. 3). Several factors have contributed to this aversion. First, schools continue to operate under the old factory model that assumes if the inputs are correct—if teachers are provided with the right curriculum, the right textbook, the right schedule, and so on—the results will take care of themselves.

Second, many educators have confused activity or "business" with results. This tendency is particularly evident in



“Christmas tree schools”—schools that pursue every new fad so that it can be added, like an ornament, to the structure of the school. Unfortunately, ornaments are fragile, likely to be dislodged by the first ill wind, and never become organic. They may be *on* the tree, but they are not *of* the tree.

Finally, some educators are content with the nobility of their cause and are prone to substitute good intentions for results. Intentions are fine, but they will not impact results unless and until they are translated into specific concrete actions and collective commitments. Can educators overcome their traditional tendencies to focus on activity and inputs and, as Jim Collins urges all those who hope to build great institutions, become “fanatically driven, infected with an incurable need to produce *results*” (2001)?

### **Assessment for Learning Versus Assessment of Learning**

One of the most consistent (and profound) messages presented in this collection of leading educational authors is that assessment, when done well, can be a powerful catalyst for improved learning on the part of both the students and the adults within a school. They endorse Rick Stiggin’s idea of “assessment *for* learning”—assessments that are used both to identify students who need additional support and to inform teacher practice. The authors describe teachers within a grade-level or course working together to build common assessments of essential learning. These assessments are timely; they give teachers and students frequent, ongoing feedback on the extent of each student’s learning. They are standards based; they help teachers answer the question, “How do we know if each of our students is acquiring the knowledge and skills we intended?” The assessments are formative; they are used as tools to identify



where a student might be experiencing difficulty so that the student can receive additional time and support until he or she has mastered the skill. The data from these common formative assessments are easily accessible and openly shared between teachers who then assist each other in addressing areas of concern. One of the most significant tools available to a school that is attempting to build a PLC is this process of clarifying essential outcomes, building common assessments, reaching consensus on the criteria by which teachers will judge the quality of student work, and working together to analyze data and improve results.

Unfortunately, this process faces formidable barriers in traditional schools. School-based assessments have been left to the discretion of individual teachers rather than developed by a collaborative team of colleagues. The idea of sharing their students' results with their peers (and perhaps exposing a weakness in their teaching) is not readily embraced by teachers who have spent their lives working in isolation. Teachers have tended to attribute variations in student achievement to differences in student ability rather than the effectiveness of their instruction, and thus have not viewed assessments as a way to inform their professional practice. Furthermore, as Rick Stiggins notes, the history of testing in the United States has reflected the original purpose of sorting and selecting students. Tests were not designed to help students learn; they were designed to differentiate between students (such as nationally normed tests) or to reward and punish students (summative tests). Assumptions about testing are well entrenched in many public schools, and advocates of PLCs will need to confront those assumptions if the PLC concept is to prevail.

## **Widespread Leadership Versus the Charismatic Leader**

The PLC concept operates from the premise that leadership should be widely dispersed throughout a school, and thus developing the leadership potential of all staff members is imperative. Principals in PLCs are called upon to regard themselves as leaders of leaders rather than leaders of followers, and broadening teacher leadership becomes one of their priorities. In fact, The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003, p. 17) concluded that "shared or distributive leadership" was essential to building learning communities.

The importance of widely dispersed leadership is echoed in the research outside of education as well. As one extensive study of leadership concluded, "Leadership is not a solo act. In the thousands of personal-best leadership cases we studied, we have yet to encounter a single example of extraordinary achievement that occurred without the active involvement and support of many people. Fostering collaboration is the route to high performance" (Kouzes & Posner, 1996, p. 106).

Yet schools continue to search for the charismatic, heroic leader who will single-handedly ride in to rescue a demoralized or inept staff—and they make frequent changes in leadership when the individual fails to demonstrate that he or she is the all-knowing visionary who can point the way to those who are less capable. Peter Senge and associates (1994) contend this traditional view of leaders as heroes—as people who set the direction, make the decisions, and energize the troops—is deeply rooted in the individualistic worldview of the West. As he writes, "At its heart, this traditional view of leadership is based on assumptions of people's powerlessness, their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only by a few great leaders" (p. 340).

The myth persists despite evidence to the contrary. In their research on professional learning communities, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) reported, “We encountered no instances to support the ‘great leader theory,’ charismatic people who create extraordinary contexts for teaching by virtue of their unique vision. . . . [Effective] principals empower and support teacher leadership to improve teaching practice” (p. 118).

In the private sector there is considerable evidence that there is a *negative* correlation between charismatic leadership and sustained organizational excellence (Collins & Porras, 1997). As long as schools cling to the idea of the leader as the source of inspiration and energy, their efforts to improve will continue to be characterized by stops and starts as leaders come and go. To become a PLC, a school must transcend its dependence on a single leader and develop a culture that sustains improvement despite the departure of key individuals.

### **Self-Efficacy Versus Dependency**

If there is a single theme that unites the chapters of this book and the authors who wrote them, it is that educators are capable of helping more students achieve at higher levels than ever before. In chapter 11, Michael Fullan contends that highly effective schools will remain serendipitous anomalies rather than the norm unless districts, states, and provinces engage in systemic reform to support professional learning communities. It is important to note, however, that he also emphasizes the need for individual educators to contribute to that systemic change by taking immediate steps to improve their schools. As he writes, “Each of us *is* the system.”

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of schools that have used the themes we outline in this chapter to help their students

achieve at higher levels. We can point to schools at all levels—elementary, middle, and high schools; large and small schools; suburban, rural, and urban schools; schools of affluence and schools of poverty—that have successfully implemented PLC concepts and experienced gains in student achievement. Ron Edmonds (1979) once asked a chilling question: “How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of all children?” (p. 24). The evidence of such schools is now so pervasive that no fair-minded person could refute what Edmonds and Larry Lezotte asserted almost 40 years ago: the practices of educators—what we do in our schools—can have a positive impact on student learning. Educators within a PLC are willing to acknowledge that many of the factors that result in improved student learning do lie within their sphere of influence.

In chapter 5, Jonathon Saphier makes a compelling case for the importance of teaching students to believe in “effort-based ability”—the sense of self-efficacy that convinces students that their success is dependent upon their effort, commitment, and tenacity rather than factors outside of their control. But of course the best way to instill that belief in students is to model it as adults. Will educators be able to move from an “if only” culture (if only we had more resources, if only the kids were motivated) to a “can do” culture? Will they be able to acknowledge that they have helped to create many of the barriers to high levels of learning for all? Roland Barth (1991) did a wonderful job of presenting that question almost 15 years ago when he asked principals and teachers if they were willing to:

... accept the fact that they are part of the problem rather than the helpless victims of cultural

circumstances. God didn't create self-contained classrooms, fifty-minute periods, subjects taught in isolation. We did—because we find working alone safer than and preferable to working together. . . . We *can* work to change the embedded structures so that our schools become more hospitable places for student and adult learning. But little will really change unless we change *ourselves*. (p. 128)

If schools are to be transformed into professional learning communities, the educators within them will be required to change many things—including themselves. The authors of these chapters will provide readers with a powerful conceptual framework and specific proven strategies for building PLCs, but in the final analysis, those concepts and strategies will be brought to life only if educators begin to do differently—to take actions consistent with the belief that it is their job to help all students learn at high levels, to discontinue practices and procedures that are not aligned with that purpose, and to demonstrate an unwavering faith that regardless of the difficulties, they will prevail in the end.

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